



Image courtesy of the Member

Nydia M. Velázquez

1953–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1993–
DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

The New York Times described Nydia Velázquez, the first Puerto Rican woman to serve in Congress, as “an aggressive woman in a macho political world, operating outside any political machine. She was born and raised on the island and not shaped by the urban edge and political culture of the barrio.”¹ Elected to the U.S. House in 1992, Velázquez became the first Hispanic woman in Congress to chair a full standing committee when she assumed the gavel of the Small Business Committee in 2007. Now the Ranking Member of the committee, she uses her position to advocate on behalf of small companies, particularly those owned by minorities and women.

Nydia Velázquez was born on March 28, 1953, to Don Benito Velázquez, a sugarcane cutter, and Doña Serrano Velázquez in Yabucoa, Puerto Rico. To support their nine children, the Velázquezes sold food to field workers and operated a small cinder block manufacturing business.² Nydia inherited her father’s inclination toward politics; he often delivered political speeches on behalf of workers’ rights.³ In 1972 she received a B.A. in political science from the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras; she was the first member of her family to graduate from college. Two years later, she earned a master’s degree on a scholarship at New York University. In 1976 Velázquez taught at the University of Puerto Rico in Humacao. In 1981 she began a two-year stint as an adjunct professor at Hunter College in New York City, teaching Puerto Rican studies. In 1983 she served as a special assistant for Representative Edolphus Towns of New York. A year later, she was appointed to fill a vacant seat on the New York City Council, becoming its first Latina member. After she lost her re-election bid in 1986, Velázquez served as director of the agency that later became the Department of Puerto Rican Community Affairs in the United States.

In 1992 she sought the New York City House seat held by nine-term incumbent Democrat Stephen Solarz. The newly apportioned district encompassed the working-class parts of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, northern Brooklyn, and Queens. As a former member of the City Council, Nydia Velázquez mounted a grass-roots primary campaign, arguing that a Puerto Rican should represent the new district’s Puerto Rican majority. She won the five-way primary over Solarz by five percent of the vote and the general election with 77 percent of the vote. Velázquez has been re-elected to nine succeeding Congresses, usually by margins of 80 percent or more.⁴

Velázquez has served on the Financial Services (formerly Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs) and Small Business Committees during her House career. She currently serves on the Financial Services Subcommittees on Insurance, Housing and Community Opportunity and Financial Institutions and Consumer Credit. In 1998 she became the Ranking Member on the Small Business Committee and in 2007, when Democrats regained control of the House, she became chairwoman until the Republicans regained majority status in the House after the 2010 elections.

The Small Business Committee oversees federal programs and contracts that total more than \$200 billion annually, and Velázquez has used her position as Ranking Member to cultivate more federal support for small business and entrepreneurship in her district and nationally. She has sought to steer federal agencies toward contracting with small businesses, to help the owners of small firms provide medical and retirement benefits to their employees, and to make federal loans and grants more accessible to small firms. She has criticized federal agencies for what she views as their unsatisfactory efforts to do business with private companies, issuing an annual report card on such practices. In the 107th Congress (2001–2003), Velázquez called attention to the effects of sweatshop industries on the working-class poor in her district. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, she introduced legislation that required the hiring of small businesses to clean up and reconstruct lower Manhattan.

Velázquez is keenly interested in immigration matters and in U.S. foreign policy in the Caribbean. Much of her district casework centers on immigration issues, as many of her constituents have family in Caribbean countries. She has worked for increased funding to reduce the immigration backlog at the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services. Velázquez consistently advocated for ending practice bombing on the U.S. Navy's test range on the island of Vieques, just off the Puerto Rican coast, and for liberating Puerto Rican political prisoners. In 1994, she protested the Clinton administration's policy of refusing Haitian refugees entrance into the United States.⁵

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "Nydia M. Velázquez," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

NOTES

- 1 Deborah Sontag, "Puerto Rican-Born Favorite Treated Like Outsider," 2 November 1992, *New York Times*: B1.
- 2 Biographical Resource Center, www.Galenet.com; *Politics in America, 2004* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2003): 705.
- 3 Maria Newman, "From Puerto Rico to Congress, a Determined Path," 27 September 1992, *New York Times*: 33.
- 4 Newman, "From Puerto Rico to Congress, a Determined Path"; "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 5 Associated Press Candidate Biography, 2000; Douglas Jehl, "Clinton's Options on Haiti: Ever Harsher Choices Ahead," 6 May 1994, *New York Times*: A10.